Review Essay

The Persistence of Race/Racism in Communication Studies

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One need not be a scholar of race to understand how important race is in North America. Debates about slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, Indigenous reconciliation and land rights, athlete protests, and media portrayals of racial minorities are discussed openly on Twitter, the leading news magazines and websites, and on television news. The discipline of communication studies is also rife with exciting debates about whiteness, minoritarian scholars, and the legacies of race and racism that still disadvantage faculty and students of colour. These controversies have come to a head with the recent Martin J. Medhurst conflagration in Rhetoric & Public Affairs and the CRTNET listserv. As such, it seems timely to take up three recent books about communication and race: So You Want to Talk about Race, Race(ing) Intercultural Communication: Racial Logics
in a Colorblind Era, and, Africana Race and Communication: A Social Study of Film, Communication, and Social Media. These books are important not only because they add to the scholarship on race and help all scholars think through race’s many communicative resonances, but also because they weigh on the question of what communication studies does with or for and should do about race and racism in its own departments, journals, doctoral programs, and classrooms.

I write from the United States, where race is, of course, thought about differently than in Canada. That race is thought about differently is true around the world, however. Race takes on different meanings in complex racial systems that are connected to colourism, gender, sexuality, coloniality, and class. For a number of reasons, including a larger Black population, the racialization of Islam in a post-9/11 world, and increasing hand-wringing from the political right about immigration and the chimera of a porous border with Mexico, race has come to occupy centre stage in much U.S. political discourse. This is not to suggest that Canada has not dealt and does not continue to deal with race’s importance in culture. We know that First Nations and Métis peoples have long suffered from systemic racism, and that their activism today has pushed Indigenous rights, respect, and equality to the forefront of many policy conversations. We also know that Black Canadians from Montréal to Toronto to Vancouver have been involved in the struggles of equality, fighting in the U.S. Civil War, serving in the Underground Railroad, and fighting for rights not against a federal or state level set of policies and practices like those of the Jim Crow United States, but rather against the prejudices and discrimination of local officials, businesspeople, and labour leaders during the same time period.

Communication studies, inclusive of rhetorical studies, media studies, and argumentation studies, has grappled with race for some time now. The results have not always been beneficial. Talk with a scholar of colour and one will no doubt learn of research projects scuttled, microaggressions, and difficulties with faculty and students alike. Increasingly this grappling with race has been directly, and in this author’s opinion necessarily, critical of communication studies’ own complicity in whiteness (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, & McIwain, 2018; Houdek, 2018). That is, communication studies has long assumed a White, cisgendered, upper-middle class, educated, able-bodied, Christian as the norm—as the ideal communicator. Yet, the experiences many communication studies scholars have had, particularly scholars of colour, suggests that this model disempowers and discriminates against many of our students and colleagues, and depending on one’s social location, one’s self.

Communication studies scholars should study race. Student bodies are diversifying and our students will work in an interconnected world. Our students will interact with people who do not share their racial or ethnic identity, and rather than accepting the liberal panacea of a colourblind society, students will need to embrace and learn about people different than them. Race matters, politically, in countries as diverse as the United States, China, India, Mexico, Germany, and Brazil. Race comes up in daily lives as people interact with customer service representatives at big-box stores, the police at a traffic stop, and one’s family at holiday meals. Race receives attention from politicians and various political groups. Racial hatred fuels elections, protests, and
counter-protests. Given that we formulate our ideas about race based on the messages communicated to us and by us, from interpersonal interactions to social media messages, the three books under review in this essay represent thoughtful contributions to a pressing cultural issue. They also come at a time when communication studies is openly engaging its own racist past, and attempting to make a more meaningful racial future that is led by minoritarian scholars.

In this essay, I review Ijeoma Oluo’s So You Want to Talk about Race, Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling’s edited collection Race(ing) Intercultural Communication: Racial Logics in a Colorblind Era, and James L. Conyers, Jr.’s Africana Race and Communication: A Social Study of Film, Communication, and Social Media. I will review these texts in the order listed, and after doing so will explain the salience of these books given an inflammatory editorial published by Martin Medhurst (2019, but since retracted) in the journal Rhetoric & Public Affairs that confirms some of the very worst suspicions about communication studies’ complicity with racism. Reading these books in the context of communication studies’ own understanding of race in the discipline helps scholars appreciate their role in maintaining and undermining systemic racism, micro- and macroaggressions, and hopefully encourages scholars to practice the best possible racial politics in the classroom and beyond. There is no time like the present to critically read these contributions to race and communication if for no other reason than communication studies scholars cannot be neutral on the recent race-based arguments circulating throughout the discipline given that the impacts of racism in communication studies manifest in material harms for minoritarian scholars.

Ijeoma Oluo’s text is an informative, occasionally funny, honest text about discussing race as a Black woman. Her stories are often touching, including the conversations she relays with her mother, often frustrating, including conversations she has with coworkers and friends, and always illuminating. This is a book that brings discussions about intercultural communication to the everyday, not burdened by complex theories or string citations to authors not read but necessarily cited. Her audience is not likely academia, but that does not mean there is nothing available for class. Scholars of intercultural communication will find her helpful discussion of microaggressions, particularly her candour about people not knowing they are using them, a welcome addition to classroom discussions about the subtle way racism seeps into everyday discourse. Her chapter on the model minority myth helps the reader appreciate race and racism as not a Black and White issue, but as an issue that touches Asian and Asian-American people in profound ways. My favourite mass-mediated Canadian struggle with the model minority myth is the CBC television show Kim’s Convenience, which focuses on a Korean-Canadian family in Toronto’s Moss Park neighbourhood. The television show, in seemingly every episode, shows daughter Janet and estranged son Jung struggling with what it means to be a good daughter and son, to be an acceptable Korean-Canadian. They battle with questions of behaviour, obedience to and respect for parents, development of their identities, the proper role of work and education, and much more as they try to be true to themselves while also being pressured by expectations about what they should be and do. This television sitcom demonstrates how the model minority myth bears heavily on those negotiating it.
Oluo has given us the least pretentious, least mired in abstraction book about race in communication in years. Her discussion of the false narratives surrounding affirmative action is deep with responses to common arguments, yet recognizes the slippery ways affirmative action is used to describe a litany of practices. Lest one conclude that racism is too big to take on, Oluo gives the reader practical solutions from voting locally to supporting livable wages to supporting people-of-colour-owned-business. Her solutions are workable and also consistent with what many communication scholars have argued for—they just have not always done so in easily digestible language nor in books with a reasonable purchase price. Given the Medhurst controversy, Oluo’s suggestions strike a resonant chord with attempts to cite more scholars of colour, voting for communication association leaders of colour, and devoting more resources to support faculty and students of colour. Communication studies must take seriously its own racism, and Oluo’s practical advice promises broad applicability to academia.

This is a book that should be read in communication studies classes on diversity, intercultural communication, and race and communication. It is appropriate for the undergraduate classroom, but may lack the scholarly rigor graduate classrooms often demand. Yet, graduate students, particularly as they prepare to teach or head to public policy jobs, would be well informed by this book and prepared to meet a racist world. Diversity and inclusion, human resources, and student services personnel will also find this book helpful for understanding race. Perhaps just as important, whoever reads this book will have strategies to address racism as they encounter it and ways to check their own racist communication patterns.

Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling’s edited book, Race(ing) Intercultural Communication: Racial Logics in a Colorblind Era, is a collection of essays that were published as a double issue of the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication. This presents several strengths and weaknesses. First, as the chapters/articles were already peer reviewed by reviewers for the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, one can be assured that they have been thoroughly vetted, copy-edited, and critiqued. For scholars, this is welcome news as edited volumes are often rife with errors, differences in style and citation, and an incongruity that makes them seem more like a cobbled-together last-minute course reading list than a cohesive body of scholarship on a central issue or theme. Second, many of the authors represented are at the top of their fields or research agendas. While it is important to give younger or less experienced scholars the opportunity to publish in edited collections (in fact, communication studies should do more of this), it is exciting to know that the work of Rachel Alicia Griffin, J. David Cisneros, and Thomas K. Nakayama await the text’s readers. Now, the obvious criticism: the book is superfluous if one has access to the journal from which these articles came. The editors even instruct readers to cite to the original journal articles’ pagination (p. vii). Obviously, the book is useful to many beyond the scholars with university library access, but for those undergraduate and graduate students and scholars with access to the journal, save the 51.95 USD and download the articles.

The book does raise important questions about visibility (Marzia Milazzo), electronic media (Cisneros and Nakayama), and the differences in how racial groups expe-
rience racism (Shinsuke Eguchi, Anjana Mudambi, and Chad M. Nelson). Of particular note, Milazzo’s chapter on colour blindness (spelled “colorblindness” in the chapter) in South Africa helps readers understand that colour blindness is not only a United States or North American problem, but rather a problem in other countries where racial logics seek to render racial minorities invisible under the guise of a liberal politics that has moved “beyond” race. Cisneros and Nakayama analyze the ways colour blindness and postracialism manifest in social media highlighting that social media is not immune from racism, and also that racism is resilient, complex, and networked. Their analysis of the Miss America pageant also underscores the need to read race and gender together to understand oppression and the disempowering effects of postracialism and colour blindness. Given that students and scholars are increasingly using Twitter, the subject of Cisneros and Nakayama’s investigation, as well as Instagram and Snapchat, this chapter is an important read in our social media-laden times.

This text is recommended for graduate classes as some of the articles are at times dense and jargon rich. That is not to suggest that undergraduates would not benefit, but rather that scholars should think about where their students are in their academic careers and social understanding before adopting the book. This book will be particularly important for students and scholars who lack access to the journal from which the chapters come and who do not want to pay the exorbitant prices of single-article purchases set by publishers.

James L. Conyers, Jr.’s Africana Race and Communication: A Social Study of Film, Communication, and Social Media is a worthwhile but uneven text. Scholars of race and media will find this a particularly rewarding text as many genres of television programming and movies are discussed. Because Blackness is still often portrayed tropologically, lacking nuance and falling back on stereotypes, this collection of essays challenges the common tropes of Blackness (the jezebel, mammy, thug, etc.) by bringing communicative critiques of race to news coverage, television drama, music videos, reality television, Twitter, and other online forums.

Of note are chapters by Amber Johnson and Siobhan E. Smith. Smith’s chapter highlights the way court television shows (think Judge Judy and related programming) reinforce cultural norms about gender and race. It also calls the reader’s attention to resist reading court television shows as value- or race-neutral. Her feminist analysis helps us understand the relationship between race, gender, and law in television programming. The reader develops an appreciation for the role of symbols (scales of justice, the American flag, the gavel, etc.) in maintaining power, and is left wondering who is disempowered (Black women according to Smith’s astute analysis) by mediated court representations.

Amber Johnson’s chapter is an important exploration of her modelling career and her experience with a hip-hop music video shoot by artist Nelly. As she plays the role of video vixen she is confronted both with opportunities to resist and support gender, sexual, and racial norms of behaviour, speech, and bodily comportment. She deftly situates her story in the existing literature on performance studies and race, and makes a compelling case for the importance of lived experience in understanding racial performances. This chapter shines.
One of the central problems with this text is uneven editing. Citations are not consistent in reference lists nor in text, which is likely to be jarring for some readers and frustrating for students and scholars looking for additional resources on the important issues discussed. While this might seem like nitpicking, it is also tough to ignore. Another problem is that the reader is left without an understanding of what Africana and race mean in the title, and the editor’s Introduction does not help. A discussion of terminology would be helpful. Does the title suggest something about the authors, the subjects covered, or the methods used? In what ways does the notion of Africana race differ from race or Black race? Is the book oriented toward African thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and not North America race scholars like Derrick Bell, Angela Davis, and Sylvia Wynter? Both readers with race theory experience and those new to studying race are likely to have these questions.

This book is recommended for courses focused on anti-black racism and communication as well as media studies classrooms as many of the texts examined are movies, television shows, and other media productions. As the text might be daunting for undergraduates given the wide range of theories and citations, this book will likely be better used in advanced undergraduate courses or special topics courses.

As interesting as these books are for students and scholars, none really get at the problem the discipline itself has with race. The discipline needs books that are critical of communication studies’ racism. Despite the language of diversity and inclusion, commitments to celebrating differences, and promises of acceptance and welcoming, communication studies still suffers from the racism endemic to White arrival on the North American continent. This racism is often overt and explicit. Recently a firestorm of controversy has rightly surrounded Martin J. Medhurst’s (2019, but since retracted) editorial for Rhetoric & Public Affairs. The editorial exhibits the White tradition of faux-liberal hand-wringing over an emphasis by the leadership of the National Communication Association (NCA) for more diversity in journal leadership and editorial boards. He also worries over the change in election process for NCA’s Distinguished Scholars program—a program that recognizes sustained and significant contribution to the discipline of communication studies. Medhurst sets up a false dichotomy between scholarly merit and diversity such that merit is threatened when diversity is increased (Dutta, 2019). Dutta further critiques Medhurst’s arguments as lacking warrants, containing logical fallacies, and being ambivalent about the relationship toward evidence of racial difference in the selection of Distinguished Scholars.

Setting up Martin J. Medhurst as the scapegoat for this problem, however, denies the systemic nature of racism in communication studies, and risks denying the critical footing needed to advance a much more theoretically robust engagement with the discipline’s racism. While Medhurst’s editorial is deeply problematic, it is not Martin Medhurst who signed a letter of protest about NCA’s interest in improving diversity—it was 66 of the 70 living Distinguished Scholars who signed it. Lack of diversity on editorial boards, whiteness’ constraining influence on scholarly publication from the best journals to the less-read and less-cited journals, graduate students being shut down or urged to pursue other dissertation projects, and younger scholars who are asked to write less about race or whose scholarship is labeled too public or too activist are not
Martin J. Medhurst’s creation. They are the work of the discipline. They are the work of gatekeepers. Ijeoma Oluo would likely tell us to discuss these issues, to appreciate that even well-intentioned folks can be racist, and to understand that the workplaces, friend groups, and interests we have are racialized. We will not understand that if we continue to resist diversity by cloaking opposition in false dichotomies. Many of Conyers’ edited collection’s authors would urge communication studies to centre Black experience in our dealings with race, such that we stop discussing diversity, a lovely word White folks like to use instead of racism, and start to talk about how communication studies can help understand anti-Black racism in all its manifestations. Likewise, Moon and Holling’s authors would attune us to the intersections of race such that Medhurst’s trouble with diversity is not only about anti-Black racism (which it clearly is not), but is also a threat to gender, sexuality, religious, ethnic, and class minorities.

The books reviewed here provide strategies for dealing with communication studies’ racism. Oluo’s book will be particularly helpful for those interested in organizing and making on-the-ground changes. Moon and Holling’s edited collection provides examples of the types of scholarship communication studies must pursue in order to do more than reproduce the logics of racism that have informed the discipline for so long. Conyers’ edited collection provides an example of the ways communication studies scholars can apply their theoretical work on race to media representations, which is all that much more important given that our students are bombarded with racialized media representations at seemingly every hour of the day.

A fear of difference is a clear indication of the persistence of racism in communication studies, and a call to read and take seriously the books reviewed herein.

Note

1. I have referenced the page numbers of the book and not the articles, despite the editors’ suggestion, in order for the reader to be able to purchase the book and move to the chapter cited without the, albeit slight, use of math.

References


